NATIONAL HOTEL
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Washington, D.C.

National Hotel

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CAPITAL TO LOSE NATIONAL HOTEL

Old Structure Which Sheltered Presidents and In Which History Was Written Will Be Razed In Washington's Vast Building Project

By MARIE MANNING.

THE old National, Washington's most interesting hotel, has received its sentence. Sold to the government for $580,000, it is to be razed in preparation for those vast building projects which are to make the capital as splendid as our new status in the world.

Built more than a century ago, it is reasonable to suppose no other hotel in the country can boast as many distinguished names on its register or lay claim to being the incubator in which so much history was hatched. It was opened by the Gadsbys in 1826 and was supreme till Wormley, who could cook "a morsel for a monarch," began, in the '70s, to steal a bit of its fashionable patronage. Up till then it had been host to nearly all of the Presidents.

In what used to be known as the banqueting hall, Lincoln made his first appearance after his inauguration in 1861 at a dinner given in his honor by the New York delegation. One of the negro waiters who had often served him when he was a member of Congress could ill conceal his ecstasies at having the black man's friend as President and cut a few impromptu jig steps in a serving pantry and upset a dish of "trifle." The conclusion of the tragedy is not known.

According to the minutes of Booth's trial at the National Hotel on Friday, April 18, 1865, a tall, slender boy named David Herold went about the crowd in the lobby looking for a familiar face. The night clerk, Mr. Burton, going off duty, encountered him.

"Looking for Mr. Booth?" he asked. The boy said he was.

"Well, I don't think he's in. I didn't see him come in last night, and he usually stops for a chat with me before he goes to bed. But you'd better look in his room and see."

Young Herold walked up a flight to No. 228, knocked, but John Wilkes Booth was not in his room. The mystery of where he spent the night before Lincoln's assassination has never been solved. Booth and Burton were good friends, and they attended Lincoln's second inaugural ceremony together. The hotel man, an abolitionist and hearty supporter of Lincoln, testified that he never heard the actor say anything derogatory to the President, or knew of his intense feeling, though Booth was understood to be a Southern sympathizer.

Booth kept a room at the National Hotel whether he occupied it or not, and he told the management that certain friends would always be welcome to this room. No one seemed to think the arrangement peculiar; it was a day of open-handed hospitality and of large potations.

Lincoln Kidnapping Plot.

The earlier plot which had to do with kidnapping Lincoln as he drove from the Soldiers' Home and concealing him in that secret room in the old Van Ness house (the site of which is now occupied by the Pan American Building) may have been discussed here. Its utter impracticability almost put it in the class with schemes of little boys playing pirates in the backyard. It is likely that more wild talk took place at the National than at Mrs. Surratt's, 541 H Street, only a few blocks distant.

The manager of the National Hotel is not certain that the 228 of today is the 228 of 1865. Remodeling has been done along that corridor and the numbers may have been changed. But the room and those adjoining could not have been altered much since Booth and his friends gathered there. Square and large, with low ceilings and simple furnishings, they are restfully free from disturbing effects.

Henry Clay lived for years in the National Hotel and died there in 1852. Room 32, always occupied by Clay, was the background for much of the drafting and rewriting of his famous compromise bill.

Clay's rival, Daniel Webster, put up at the old National when he was building what was then known as "Webster's Folly," that unostentatious residence facing Lafayette Park, afterward occupied by W. W. Corcoran, and now the site of the United States Chamber of Commerce.

A picturesque figure around the old National was Alexander H. Stephens, Vice President of the Confederacy, Representative and Governor of Georgia. Paralyzed, he was wheeled in a chair to his seat in the House of Representatives by a couple of huge negroes, who tended him assiduously. At the National he wrote his history: "A Constitutional View of the Late War Between the States."

Justice Taney's Dinners.

Chief Justice Roger B. Taney, author of the famous Dred Scott decision, was apparently the first to start that now popular custom of entertaining away from home. He lived in what is now called John Marshall Place, only a few blocks away, but he preferred to have the fuss and bother of political dinners away from his own roof, and the terrapin—for which the old National was famous—was especially prepared for the Chief Justice by the hotel cook.

Robert W. Walker, Secretary of the Treasury in 1845, lived at the National. So did President Polk before his inauguration. And it was there that George M. Dallas, his Vice President, and afterward Minister to Great Britain and Russia, was challenged to a duel, which was prevented by the President.

Prince and Princess Salm-Salm must not be omitted. Lincoln thought the lady "comely," and her Paris frocks were the wonder and despair of Washington dressmakers.

The transfer of the National to the government was signed by George Calvert, as president of the hotel company. It was to George Calvert's ancestor, Lord Baltimore, that the site of the National Hotel, along with the rest of the State of Maryland, came into the Calvert family's possession by royal grant.

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FAMED LANDMARK IN WASHINGTON TORN DOWN

WASHINGTON, Feb. 26.—The landmarks of stirring days in the nation's history gave way before the search of progress recently.

If the destruction of famous homes and historic structures continues at last year's rate the tourist to Washington seeking inspiration from a pilgrimage of sacred spots where history was written with the pen of statesmen, the blood of martyrs and the tears of slaves will have no difficulty in making his round of observation with a lorgnette.

Real estate demands were responsible for the razing of the old Capitol Hotel, on Pennsylvania avenue, where many a northern senator had vague prejudices against slavery, crystallized into an unbending resolution for its abolition, while the Senate in authorizing the sale of a forgotten stable on E street doomed to destruction the building which housed the horse on which John Wilkes Booth escaped after he shot President Lincoln in Ford Theater, two blocks away.

Only a few roomy chimneys and spacious fireplaces now mark the spot where stood the old-fashioned hotel, with its gleaming white-washed walls and its dormer-windowed roof. Here New England Senators often gazed out their bedroom windows at the auction block where black men and women were being sold admidst the raucous crier of the auctioneer and prospective buyers. The auction block still remains.

During turbulent days of the Republic Senators and Representatives who live in the section west of the White House, then a long journey from Capitol Hill, often put up for a night at the three-storied hostelry ready to answer a hurried call for a midnight session.

Henry Clay, Daniel Webster and John C. Calhoun were a trio of history-makers who sought rest and inspiration from the inn's beds and bar. Then it was one of the show places of the Capital, but for twenty years now it has been virtually dismantled. The city has moved on, leaving it stranded in a neighborhood cluttered with chop suey houses and Greek restaurants and gypsey fortune telling booths.

The Senate's resolution recalled the stable from oblivion. The government has owned it since 1874, and in recent years it has been used as a storage house by the War Department. How Booth, was severely injured in the leg as he leaped from Lincoln's box to the stage, was physically able to traverse the two blocks to the stable is a mystery which historians, as well as eye-witnesses of the tragedy, have never solved.

Historians of the mathematical and scientific schools have often conducted experiments looking to a solution, pacing and repacing the distance many times and trying to understand how the assassin could have made it, crippled as he was. But they have not found the answer yet, and if they don't get it in a few weeks, they never will, for the stable will have vanished.

Mr. Lincoln's White House - The National Hotel

mrlincolnswhitehouse.org

The National Hotel was the primary competitor to the Willard. It was located at the corner of Pennsylvania Avenue and 6th Street, several blocks from the White House. During the 1830s and 1840s, the hotel was called Gadsby's and was top hotel in the city. The National's predominantly southern patronage had been affected by an outbreak of intestinal illness during President Buchanan's inauguration; several persons died from the outbreak which Southerners attributed to a Republican plot to wipe out Democrats. Anthony Pitch wrote that "even though patronized by many celebrities, it did not have a spotless reputation. The wife of one general had stormed out in disgust, complaining that she was not rugged enough to endure the sickening filth."1

The National had been a rallying point for Douglas Democrats on the way to the 1860 Democratic National Convention in Charleston, South Carolina.

Actor John Wilkes Booth customarily stayed at the National when in Washington. Carl Sandburg wrote: "Most of the time until April 15, 1865, Booth lived in Washington, checking in and out of his National Hotel quarters, taking many trips on errands whose purpose he kept secret. He studied Lincoln's ways and habits, particularly as a theatregoer."2 In 1865 it was at the National where Booth was lodged in the days before he assassinated President Lincoln on April 14. Ironically, a month earlier on March 17, 1865, the President had visited the hotel where he spoke to the 140th Indiana Regiment from the balcony and presented a captured Confederate flag to Governor Oliver Morton of Indiana. He warned his audience that he would say only a few words:

> I was born in Kentucky, raised in Indiana, reside in Illinois, and now here, it is my duty to care equally for the good people of all the States. I am to-day glad of seeing it in the power of an Indiana regiment to present this captured flag to the good governor of their State. And yet I would not wish to compliment Indiana above other states, remembering that all have done so well. There are but few aspects of this great war on which I have not already expressed my views by speaking or writing. There is one--the recent effort of our erring brethern, sometimes so-called,

to employ the slaves in their armies. The great question with them has been; "will the negro fight for them?" They ought to know better than we; and doubtless, do know better than we. I may incidentally remark, however, that having, in my life, heard many arguments,--or strings of words meant to pass for arguments,--intended to show that the negro ought to be a slave, that if he shall now really fight to keep himself a salve, it will be a far better argument why [he] should remain a slave than I have ever before heard. He, perhaps, ought to be a slave, if he desires it ardently enough to fight for it. Or, if one out of four will, for his own freedom, fight to keep the other three in slavery, he ought to be a slave for his selfish meanness. I have always thought that all men should be free; but if any should be slaves it should be first those who desire it for themselves, and secondly those who desire it for others. Whenever [I] hear any one, arguing for slavery I feel a strong impulse to see it tried on him personally.
There is one thing about the negroes fighting for the rebels which we can know as well [as] they can; and that is that they can not, at {the] same time fight in their armies, and stay at home and make bread for them. And this being known and remembered we can have but little concern whether they become soldiers or not. I am rather in favor of the measure; and would at any time if I could, have loaned them a vote to carry it. We have to reach the bottom of the insurgent resources; and that they employ, or seriously think of employing, the slaves as soldiers, gives us glimpses of the bottom. Therefore I am glad of what we learn on this subject.3

According to Stanley Kimmel, author of *Mr. Lincoln's Washington*, "As Lincoln left the balcony, there were more cheers, and music by the band. To many present, he still appeared to be in ill-health, and after receiving the greetings of a few personal friends in the parlor of the hotel, he returned to the White House. It was upon this occasion that Wilkes Booth, then living at the hotel, mingled in the crowd swarming about Lincoln's carriage, and watched him with such a demoniacal expression that his hatred of the President was noticed by those standing nearby. It was also while Lincoln was speaking that a girl named Lizzy Murty, who resided there and was known as the genuine Secesh,' tried to spit upon his head. Not until Lincoln was dead were the facts known and the girl take into custody." 4

Footnotes

1. Anthony S. Pitch, *"They Have Killed Papa Dead!"*, p. 54.
2. Carl Sandburg, *"Abraham Lincoln: The War Years"*, Volume IV, p. 318.
3. Roy P. Basler, editor, *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, Volume VIII, pp. 360-62.
4. Stanley Kimmel, *Mr. Lincoln's Washington*, p. 172.

Lost National Hotel on Pennsylvania Avenue

Tom
Fri Feb 14th, 2014

In keeping with the hotel theme this week, we wanted to share a little bit about the National Hotel, formerly situated at 6th and Pennsylvania Ave., across from where the Indian Queen was. The location is currently the site of the Newseum (one of our best museums if you haven't yet been there).

National Hotel in the 1920s

Source: Library of Congress

One of the most famous hotels in the city's history, the National Hotel was opened by John Gadsby from Alexandria. It ceased serving as a hotel in 1931, functioning as a government building until 1942, when it was razed.

We dug up an interesting historic perspective of the hotel in *The Washington Post* from January 5th, 1930.

A tragedy soon will be enacted in this city the like of which Washington has seldom, if ever, seen before. The famous old National Hotel is to be razed. It is one of the oldest hostelries in America, having been in continuous operation since 1827, when John Gadsby came from Alexandria to open it. One family, the Calvert family, kin by blood to Lord Baltimore, who founded Maryland, has owned it from the beginning, and a member of that family, the other day, sold it to the Government for $580,000. It comes down now in response to the spirit of progress, to make room for the new civic center which the District government will build on the north side of the Avenue.

Apart from the Capitol and the White House, there is no building in the city so historic as this. For more than half a century the history of the Nation was made there. Within its walls great political contests that affected the destiny of the Nation were mapped out, and here the most infamous crime in American history, the assassination of Lincoln, was planned. Every President from Jackson to Lincoln was a guest there, and there lived Henry Clay; there he died.

Its cuisine was world renowned as far back as Old Hickory's day, and beginning with his famous private dinner to John C. Calhoun and ending with the banquet given to Lincoln the day after his first inauguration by the New York delegation in Congress, its banquet halls rung with the eloquence of Clay and Webster, Calhoun and Hayne, Crittenden and Alexander H. Stephens. Chief Justice Taney, when he entertained with an official dinner, gave it at the National, for in his day it was noted for its terrapin dinners and for its rare old wines.

...

John Gadsby, the first proprietor of the National, was a noted man in George Washington's day, for the master of Mount Vernon often stopped at Gadsby's Tavern in Alexandria and had a bird and a bottle with the genial host. When business fell off in Alexandria, due to its proximity to Washington, Gadsby came over the river in 1827 and picked out the very site on which the National is built, and had an English architect design the building and superintend the construction. The Calvert family owned the ground and gave him a long lease on it. When completed, it was named Gadsby's Hotel, and it bore that name until 1844, when John Gadsby sold out and retired from the hotel business.

...

Gadsby's first guests of any note was Andrew Jackson, who went there on the occasion of his coming to Washington to be inaugurated President. Parton says that Old Hickory stopped at the Indian Queen, but Parton was not particularly noted for accuracy. He was plethoric and voluminous in his writings, but accurate never. Wilhemina Bogardus Bryan, who is one of the most careful of annalists, says it was the National, and so do other historians. So at the National Andy stays.

...

On the day of his inauguration the most disgraceful scene in history of such events took place at the White House, and Jackson, on being rescued by the company of strong men, who locked their arms about him, was glad to retire by a side door in safety to his rooms at gadsby's. That night he sat down in a room to dinner with John C. Calhoun as his guest. The piece de resistance was a roast cut from a quarter of beer sent Jackson by an admirer. He did not fail, before retiring, to write a letter of thanks to the kind donor. What would we not give to know what he and Calhoun talked about at that dinner. Soon they would be at each other's throats, in the bitterest of all our political feuds.

Below is a print of the hotel just before the Civil War. The view is down Pennsylvania Ave. from 6th St., and in the background, you can see the unfinished Capitol dome.

Drawing shows a woman and child exiting the telegraph office, and the National Hotel, at Pennsylvania and 6th Street, NW, as carriages and people move up and down Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington DC. The view is toward the Capitol, with its incomplete dome by A. Miller in 1860. (Library of Congress)

Source: Library of Congress

Gadsby ended up selling the property to the Willards (i.e., the family that had the eponymous D.C. hotel). The story continues.

Business grew so rapidly under Mr. Willard's management that in 1852 the hotel had to be enlarged, more than a hundred guests weekly being turned away during the rush season. Mr. Calvert spent $45,000 on this, $19,000 remodeling the old building, and $26,000 making the additions, which increased the number of rooms to 356. "Of these there are three extra large rooms, capable of containing messes of a dozen each, so that the National Hotel, during the next session of Congress, will be enabled easily to accommodate 400 guests." In 1865 it accommodated 1,100.

...

President Polk had stopped here with his lovely wife while waiting for his inauguration in 1845, and George M. Dallas, the Vice President, also. While a guest in this house Dallas was challenged to fight a duel, and accepted, but Polk used his kind offices to prevent it, and Dallas lived to be minister to Great Britain and to Russia.

...

Henry Clay died in the National Hotel just before the enlargement took place. He left his home in Ashland on November 1, 1849, accompanied only by his valet, a free man of color. Zachary Taylor was on the throne, and Clay accepted but held only formal relations with the last of the Whig Presidents. He took a parlor and bedroom at the National, and attended the sessions of the Senate but irregularly. One important speech he made before returning home.

Although his health was sensibly declining, Clay came on to Washington in December, 1851, for the last session of Congress he was ever to attend, taking his old suite, No. 32, in the National. It was as famous in his day as the "Amen Corner" in the Fifth Avenue in Tom Platt's day, or Room No. 5, Andrew Johnson's suite, in the old Maxwell House in Nashville.

Clay died on June 29th, 1852 in the National Hotel with his son Thomas at his side.

Exterior of Old National Hotel II

Source: Library of Congress

The piece continues with a crazy story about President Buchanan and the ominous sounding National Hotel Disease (which actually has a Wikipedia page).

When James Buchanan came on to his inauguration in 1857 he stopped at the National for several days, and on the night before the inauguration sewer gas backed up into the hotel, making all of the guests very sick, some of them desperately so. A medical officer of the Navy is accredited with saving Buchanan's life. In the history of the city this incident is known

as the National Hotel sickness, and for a long time it was believe that it came from bad food or from poison placed in the food.

...

During the secession war Gen. Ben Butler made the National Hotel his whenever he was in Washington, and here, too, lived John Wilkes Booth, "convivial in his habits, sprightly and genial in conversation." He made many friends among the young men of his own age," saysBen Perley Poor in his reminiscences, and he was a favorite among the ladies at the National."

His room, No. 228, was much visited during the month of April, in which Lincoln was assassinated, and that great crime, it is believed, was hatched under the roof of that hotel. Azerodt and Herold were known to have visited him there and possibly others of the conspirators.

John E. McCullough

Booth evidently arrived at the hotel on Wednesday, November 9th, 1864 staying for two nights. He returned on the 14th for another couple of nights and while staying in the hotel, roomed with another actor, and friend, John McCullough. His friend also befell a tragic end, when he was murder by a fellow actor at the National Theatre and buried in a cellar beneath the stage. Of course, there were consistent stories of John haunting the theater thereafter.

Booth also had a few other roommates while staying at the hotel, including John P. Wentworth from California, and a Mr. McArdle. His last day at the hotel was April 8th, 1865.

National Hotel looking northeast

Source: Gettysburg Daily

http://ghostsofdc.org/2014/02/14/lost-national-hotel-pennsylvania-avenue/

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